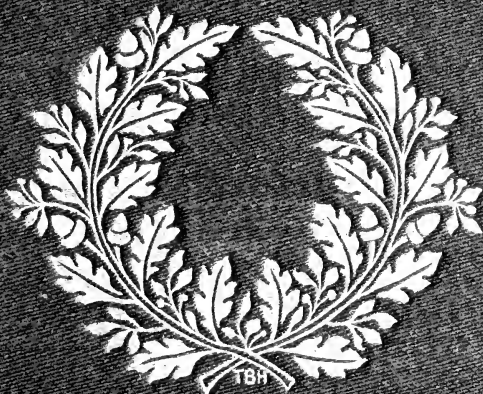


E 168
.M43
Copy 1

AMERICAN CHARACTER



BRANDER MATTHEWS



Class _____

Book _____

Copyright N^o _____

COPYRIGHT DEPOSIT.

American Character



american character

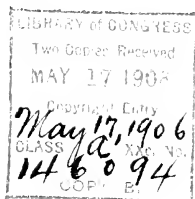
By Brander Matthews
Professor of Dramatic Literature
in Columbia University



New York
Thomas Y. Crowell & Co.
Publishers

Copyright, 1906, by Thomas Y. Crowell & Co.

Published, September, 1906



D. B. Updike, The Merrymount Press, Boston

This Address was delivered before the Phi Beta Kappa of Columbia University in June, 1905; and it was repeated at Rutgers College on Charter Day in November, 1905

merican haracter

I

IN a volume recording a series of talks with Tolstoi, published by a French writer in the final months of 1904, we are told that the Russian novelist thought the Dukhobors had attained to a perfected life, in that they were simple, free from envy, wrath and ambition, detesting violence, refraining from theft and murder, and seeking ever to do good. Then the Parisian interviewer asked which of the peoples of the world seemed most remote from the perfection to which the Dukhobors had elevated themselves; and when Tolstoi returned that he had given no thought to this question, the French correspondent suggested that we Americans deserved to be held up to scorn as the least worthy of nations.

The tolerant Tolstoi asked his visitor why he thought so ill of us; and the journalist of Paris then put forth the opinion that we Americans are "a people terribly practical, avid of plea-

sure, systematically hostile to all idealism. The ambition of the American's heart, the passion of his life, is money; and it is rather a delight in the conquest and possession of money than in the use of it. The Americans ignore the arts; they despise disinterested beauty. And now, moreover, they are imperialists. They could have remained peaceful without danger to their national existence; but they had to have a fleet and an army. They set out after Spain, and attacked her; and now they begin to defy Europe. Is there not something scandalous in this revelation of the conquering appetite in a new people with no hereditary predisposition toward war?"

It is to the credit of the French correspondent that after setting down this fervid arraignment, he was honest enough to record Tolstoi's dissent. But although he dissented, the great Russian expressed no surprise at the virulence of this diatribe. No doubt it voiced an opinion familiarized to him of late by many a newspaper of France and of Germany. Fortunately for us, the assertion that foreign nations are a contemporaneous posterity is not quite true. Yet the opinion of foreigners, even when most at fault, must have its value for us as a useful corrective of conceit. We ought to be proud of

our country; but we need not be vain about it. Indeed, it would be difficult for the most patriotic of us to find any satisfaction in the figure of the typical American which apparently exists in the mind of most Europeans, and which seems to be a composite photograph of the backwoodsman of Cooper, the negro of Mrs. Stowe, and the Mississippi River-folk of Mark Twain, modified perhaps by more vivid memories of Buffalo Bill's Wild West. Surely this is a strange monster; and we need not wonder that foreigners feel towards it as Voltaire felt toward the prophet Habakkuk, —whom he declared to be "capable of anything."

It has seemed advisable to quote here what the Parisian journalist said of us, not because he himself is a person of consequence—indeed, he is so obscure that there is no need even to mention his name — but because he has had the courage to attempt what Burke declared to be impossible,—to draw an indictment against a whole nation. It would be easy to retort on him in kind, for, unfortunately,—and to the grief of all her friends,—France has laid herself open to accusations as sweeping and as violent. It would be easy to dismiss the man himself as one whose outlook on the

world was so narrow that it seemed to be little more than what he could get through a chance slit in the wall of his own self-sufficiency. It would be easy to answer him in either of these fashions, but what is easy is rarely worth while; and it is wiser to weigh what he said and to see if we cannot find our profit in it.

Sifting the essential charges from out the mass of his malevolent accusation, we find this Frenchman alleging first, that we Americans care chiefly for making money; second, that we are hostile to art and to all forms of beauty; and thirdly, that we are devoid of ideals. These three allegations may well be considered one by one, beginning with the assertion that we are mere money-makers.

II

Now, in so far as this Frenchman's belief is but an exaggeration of the saying of Napoleon's, that the English were a nation of shopkeepers, we need not wince, for the Emperor of the French found to his cost that those same English shopkeepers had a stout stomach for fighting. Nor need we regret that we can keep shop profitably, in these days when the doors of the bankers' vaults are the real gates of the Temple of Janus, war being impossible

until they open. There is no reason for alarm or for apology so long as our shopkeeping does not cramp our muscle or curb our spirit, for, as Bacon declared three centuries ago, "walled towns, stored arsenals and armories, goodly races of horse, chariots of war, elephants, ordnance, artillery and the like, all this is but a sheep in a lion's skin, except the breed and disposition of the people be stout and warlike."

Even the hostile French traveller did not accuse us of any flabbiness of fiber; indeed, he declaimed especially against our "conquering appetite," which seemed to him scandalous "in a new people with no hereditary predisposition toward war." But here he fell into a common blunder; the United States may be a new nation — although as a fact the stars-and-stripes is now older than the tricolor of France, the union-jack of Great Britain and the standards of those new-comers among the nations, Italy and Germany, — the United States may be a new nation, but the people here have had as many ancestors as the population of any other country. The people here, moreover, have "a hereditary predisposition toward war," or at least toward adventure, since they are, every man of them, descended from some

European more venturesome than his fellows, readier to risk the perils of the Western Ocean and bolder to front the unknown dangers of an unknown land. The warlike temper, the aggressiveness, the imperialistic sentiment,—these are in us no new development of unexpected ambition; and they ought not to surprise any one familiar with the way in which our forefathers grasped this Atlantic coast first, then thrust themselves across the Alleghanies, spread abroad to the Mississippi, and reached out at last to the Rockies and to the Pacific. The lust of adventure may be dangerous, but it is no new thing; it is in our blood, and we must reckon with it.

Perhaps it is because “the breed and disposition of the people” is “stout and warlike” that our shopkeeping has been successful enough to awaken envious admiration among other races whose energy may have been relaxed of late. After all, the arts of war and the arts of peace are not so unlike; and in either a triumph can be won only by an imagination strong enough to foresee and to divine what is hidden from the weakling. We are a trading community, after all and above all, even if we come of fighting stock. We are a trading community, just as Athens was, and Venice and

Florence. And like the men of these earlier commonwealths, the men of the United States are trying to make money. They are striving to make money not solely to amass riches, but partly because having money is the outward and visible sign of success,—because it is the most obvious measure of accomplishment.

In his talk with Tolstoi our French critic revealed an unexpected insight when he asserted that the passion of American life was not so much the use of money as a delight in the conquest of it. Many an American man of affairs would admit without hesitation that he would rather make half a million dollars than inherit a million. It is the process he enjoys, rather than the result; it is the tough tussle in the open market which gives him the keenest pleasure, and not the idle contemplation of wealth safely stored away. He girds himself for battle and fights for his own hand; he is the son and the grandson of the stalwart adventurers who came from the Old World to face the chances of the new. This is why he is unwilling to retire as men are wont to do in Europe when their fortunes are made. Merely to have money does not greatly delight him—although he would regret not having it; but what does delight him unceasingly is the fun of making it.

The money itself often he does not know what to do with; and he can find no more selfish use for it than to give it away. He seems to recognize that his making it was in some measure due to the unconscious assistance of the community as a whole; and he feels it his duty to do something for the people among whom he lives. It must be noted that the people themselves also expect this from him; they expect him sooner or later to pay his footing. As a result of this pressure of public opinion and of his own lack of interest in money itself, he gives freely. In time he comes to find pleasure in this as well; and he applies his business sagacity to his benefactions. Nothing is more characteristic of modern American life than this pouring out of private wealth for public service. Nothing remotely resembling it is to be seen now in any country of the Old World; and not even in Athens in its noblest days was there a larger-handed lavishness of the individual for the benefit of the community.

Again, in no country of the Old World is the prestige of wealth less powerful than it is here. This, of course, the foreigner fails to perceive; he does not discover that it is not the man who happens to possess money that we regard with admiration but the man who is making money,

and thereby proving his efficiency and indirectly benefiting the community. To many it may sound like an insufferable paradox to assert that nowhere in the civilized world to-day is money itself of less weight than here in the United States; but the broader his opportunity the more likely is an honest observer to come to this unexpected conclusion. Fortunes are made in a day almost, and they may fade away in a night; as the Yankee proverb put it pithily, "it's only three generations from shirt-sleeves to shirt-sleeves." Wealth is likely to lack something of its glamor in a land where well-being is widely diffused and where a large proportion of the population have either had a fortune and lost it, or else expect to gain one in the immediate future.

Probably also there is no country which now contains more men who do not greatly care for large gains and who have gladly given up money-making for some other occupation they found more profitable for themselves. These are the men like Thoreau—in whose "Walden," now half a century old, we can find an emphatic declaration of all the latest doctrines of the simple life. We have all heard of Agassiz,—best of Americans, even though he was born in another republic,—how he repelled the

proffer of large terms for a series of lectures, with the answer that he had no time to make money. Closely akin was the reply of a famous machinist in response to an inquiry as to what he had been doing, — to the effect that he had accomplished nothing of late, — “we have just been building engines and making money, and I’m about tired of it.” And a few years ago a college professor of known executive ability declined the presidency of a trust company which offered him a salary at least five times what he was receiving. There are not a few men to-day in these toiling United States who hold with Ben Jonson that “money never made any man rich, — but his mind.”

But while this is true, while there are some men among us who care little for money, and while there are many who care chiefly for the making of it, ready to share it when made with their fellow-citizens, candor compels the admission that there are also not a few who are greedy and grasping, selfish and shameless, and who stand forward, conspicuous and unscrupulous, as if to justify to the full the aspersions which foreigners cast upon us. Although these men manage for the most part to keep within the letter of the law, their morality is that of the wrecker and of the pirate.

It is a symptom of health in the body politic that the proposal has been made to inflict social ostracism upon the criminal rich. We need to stiffen our conscience and to set up a loftier standard of social intercourse, refusing to fellowship with the men who make their money by overriding the law or by undermining it—just as we should have declined the friendship of Captain Kidd before he had buried his stolen treasure.

In the immediate future these men will be made to feel that they are under the ban of public opinion. One sign of an acuter sensitiveness is the recent outcry against the acceptance of "tainted money" for the support of good works. Although it is wise always to give a good deed the credit of a good motive, yet it is impossible sometimes not to suspect that certain large gifts have an aspect of "conscience money." Some of them seem to be the result of a desire to divert public attention from the evil way in which the money was made to the nobler manner in which it is spent. They appear to be the attempt of a social outlaw to buy his peace with the community. Apparently there are rich men among us, who, having sold their honor for a price, would now gladly give up the half of their fortunes to get it back.

Candor compels the admission also that by the side of the criminal rich there exists the less noxious but more offensive class of the idle rich, who lead lives of wasteful luxury and of empty excitement. When the French reporter who talked with Tolstoi called us Americans "avid of pleasure" it was this little group he had in mind, as he may have seen the members of it splurging about in Paris, squandering and self-advertising. Although these idle rich exhibit themselves most openly and to least advantage in Paris and in London, their foolish doings are recorded superabundantly in our own newspapers; and their demoralizing influence is spread abroad. The snobbish report of their misguided attempts at amusement may even be a source of danger in that it seems to recognize a false standard of social success, or in that it may excite a miserable ambition to emulate these pitiful frivolities. But there is no need of delaying longer over the idle rich; they are only a few, and they have doomed themselves to destruction, since it is an inexorable fact that those who break the laws of nature can have no hope of executive clemency.

"Patience a little; learn to wait,
Years are long on the clock of Fate."

III

The second charge which the wandering Parisian journalist brought against us was that we ignore the arts and that we despise disinterested beauty. Here again the answer that is easiest is not altogether satisfactory. There is no difficulty in declaring that there are American artists, both painters and sculptors, who have gained the most cordial appreciation in Paris itself, or in drawing attention to the fact that certain of the minor arts — that of the silversmith, for one, and for another, that of the glass-blower and the glass-cutter — flourish in the United States at least as richly as they do anywhere else, while the art of designing in stained glass has had a new birth here, which has given it a vigorous vitality lacking in Europe since the Middle Ages. It would not be hard to show that our American architects are now undertaking to solve new problems wholly unknown to the builders of Europe, and that they are often succeeding in this grapple with unprecedented difficulty. Nor would it take long to draw up a list of the concerted efforts of certain of our cities to make themselves more worthy and more sightly with parks well planned and with public buildings well proportioned and appropriately decorated. We

might even invoke the memory of the evanescent loveliness of the "White City" that graced the shores of Lake Michigan a few years ago; and we might draw attention again to the Library of Congress, a later triumph of the allied arts of the architect, the sculptor and the painter.

But however full of high hope for the future we may esteem these several instances of our reaching out for beauty, we must admit—if we are honest with ourselves—that they are all more or less exceptional, and that to offset this list of artistic achievements the Devil's Advocate could bring forward a damning catalog of crimes against good taste which would go far to prove that the feeling for beauty is dead here in America and also the desire for it. The Devil's Advocate would bid us consider the flaring and often vulgar advertisements that disfigure our highways, the barbaric ineptness of many of our public buildings, the squalor of the outskirts of our towns and villages, the hideousness and horror of the slums in most of our cities, the negligent toleration of dirt and disorder in our public conveyances, and many another pitiable deficiency of our civilization present in the minds of all of us.

The sole retort possible is a plea of confession

and avoidance, coupled with a promise of reformation. These evils are evident and they cannot be denied. But they are less evident to-day than they were yesterday; and we may honestly hope that they will be less evident to-morrow. The bare fact that they have been observed warrants the belief that unceasing effort will be made to do away with them. Once aroused, public opinion will work its will in due season. And here occasion serves to deny boldly the justice of a part of the accusation which the French reporter brought against us. It may be true that we "ignore the arts,"—although this is an obvious overstatement of the case; but it is not true that we despise beauty. However ignorant the American people may be as a whole, they are in no sense hostile toward art—as certain other people seem to be. On the contrary, they welcome it; with all their ignorance, they are anxious to understand it; they are pathetically eager for it. They are so desirous of it that they want it in a hurry, only too often to find themselves put off with an empty imitation. But the desire itself is indisputable; and its accomplishment is likely to be helped along by the constant commingling here of peoples from various other stocks than the Anglo-Saxon, since the mixture of races tends

always to a swifter artistic development.

It is well to probe deeper into the question and to face the fact that not only in the arts but also in the sciences we are not doing all that may fairly be expected of us. Athens was a trading city as New York is, but New York has had no Sophocles and no Phidias. Florence and Venice were towns whose merchants were princes, but no American city has yet brought forth a Giotto, a Dante, a Titian. It is now nearly threescore years and ten since Emerson delivered his address on the "American Scholar," which has well been styled our intellectual Declaration of Independence, and in which he expressed the hope that "perhaps the time is already come . . . when the sluggish intellect of this continent will look from under its iron lids and fulfil the postponed expectation of the world with something better than the exertions of a mechanical skill." Nearly seventy years ago was this prophecy uttered which still echoes unaccomplished.

In the nineteenth century in which we came to maturity as a nation, no one of the chief leaders of art, even including literature in its broadest aspects, and no one of the chief leaders in science, was native to our country. Perhaps we may claim that Webster was one of the

world's greatest orators and that Parkman was one of the world's greatest historians; but probably the world outside of the United States would be found unprepared and unwilling to admit either claim, however likely it may be to win acceptance in the future. Lincoln is indisputably one of the world's greatest statesmen; and his fame is now firmly established throughout the whole of civilization. But this is all we can assert; and we cannot deny that we have given birth to very few indeed of the foremost poets, dramatists, novelists, painters, sculptors, architects or scientific discoverers of the last hundred years.

Alfred Russel Wallace, whose renown is linked with Darwin's and whose competence as a critic of scientific advance is beyond dispute, has declared that the nineteenth century was the most wonderful of all since the world began. He asserts that the scientific achievements of the last hundred years, both in the discovery of general principles and in their practical application, exceed in number the sum total of the scientific achievements to be credited to all the centuries that went before. He considers, first of all, the practical applications, which made the aspect of civilization in 1900 differ in a thousand ways from what it had

been in 1801. He names a dozen of these practical applications: railways, steam navigation, the electric telegraph, the telephone, friction-matches, gas-lighting, electric lighting, the photograph, the Roentgen rays, spectrum analysis, anesthetics, and antiseptics. It is with pride that an American can check off not a few of these utilities as being due wholly or in large part to the ingenuity of one or another of his countrymen.

But his pride has a fall when Wallace draws up a second list not of mere inventions but of these fundamental discoveries, of those fecundating theories underlying all practical applications and making them possible, of those principles "which have extended our knowledge or widened our conceptions of the universe." Of these he catalogs twelve; and we are pained to find that no American has had an important share in the establishment of any of these broad generalizations. We may have added a little here and there; but no single one of all the twelve discoveries is mainly to be credited to any American. It seems as if our French critic was not so far out when he asserted that we were "terribly practical." In the application of principles, in the devising of new methods, our share was larger than that of any

other nation. In the working out of the stimulating principles themselves, our share was less than "a younger brother's portion."

It is only fair to say, however, that even though we may not have brought forth a chief leader of art or of science to adorn the wonderful century, there are other evidences of our practical sagacity than those set down by Wallace, evidences more favorable and of better augury for our future. We derived our language and our laws, our public justice and our representative government, from our English ancestors, as we derived from the Dutch our religious toleration and perhaps also our large freedom of educational opportunity. In our time we have set an example to others and helped along the progress of the world. President Eliot holds that we have made five important contributions to the advancement of civilization. First of all, we have done more than any other people to further peace-keeping, and to substitute legal arbitration for the brute conflict of war. Second, we have set a splendid example of the broadest religious toleration, — even though Holland had first shown us how. Third, we have made evident the wisdom of universal manhood suffrage. Fourth, by our welcoming of new-comers from all parts of the earth, we

have proved that men belonging to a great variety of races are fit for political freedom. Finally, we have succeeded in diffusing material well-being among the whole population to an extent without parallel in any other country in the world.

These five American contributions to civilization are all of them the result of the practical side of the American character. They may even seem commonplace as compared with the conquering exploits of some other races. But they are more than merely practical; they are all essentially moral. As President Eliot insists, they are "triumphs of reason, enterprise, courage, faith and justice over passion, selfishness, inertness, timidity, and distrust. Beneath each of these developments there lies a strong ethical sentiment, a strenuous moral and social purpose. It is for such work that multitudinous democracies are fit."

IV

A "strong ethical sentiment" and a "strenuous moral purpose" cannot flourish unless they are deeply rooted to idealism. And here we find an adequate answer to the third assertion of Tolstoi's visitor, who maintained that we are "hostile to all idealism." Our idealism may

be of a practical sort, but it is idealism none the less. Emerson was an idealist, although he was also a thrifty Yankee. Lincoln was an idealist, even if he was also a practical politician, an opportunist, knowing where he wanted to go, but never crossing a bridge before he came to it. Emerson and Lincoln had ever a firm grip on the facts of life; each of them kept his gaze fixed on the stars,—and he also kept his feet firm on the soil.

There is a sham idealism, boastful and shabby, which stares at the moon and stumbles in the mud, as Shelley did and Poe also. But the basis of the highest genius is always a broad common sense. Shakspeare and Molière were held in esteem by their comrades for their understanding of affairs; and they each of them had money out at interest. Sophocles was entrusted with command in battle; and Goethe was the shrewdest of the Grand Duke's counsellors. The idealism of Shakspeare and of Molière, of Sophocles and of Goethe, is like that of Emerson and of Lincoln; it is unfailingly practical. And thereby it is sharply set apart from the aristocratic idealism of Plato and of Renan, of Ruskin and of Nietzsche, which is founded on obvious self-esteem and which is sustained by arrogant and inexhaustible egotism. True

idealism is not only practical, it is also liberal and tolerant.

Perhaps it might seem to be claiming too much to insist on certain points of similarity between us and the Greeks of old. The points of dissimilarity are only too evident to most of us; and yet there is a likeness as well as an unlikeness. Professor Butcher has recently asserted that "no people was ever less detached from the practical affairs of life" than the Greeks, "less insensible to outward utility; yet they regarded prosperity as a means, never as an end. The unquiet spirit of gain did not take possession of their souls. Shrewd traders and merchants, they were yet idealists. They did not lose sight of the higher and distinctively human aims which give life its significance." It will be well for us if this can be said of our civilization two thousand years after its day is done; and it is for us to make sure that "the unquiet spirit of gain" shall not take possession of our souls. It is for us also to rise to the attitude of the Greeks, among whom, as Professor Butcher points out, "money lavished on personal enjoyment was counted vulgar, oriental, inhuman."

There is comfort in the memory of Lincoln and of those whose death on the field of Gettys-

burg he commemorated. The men who there gave up their lives that the country might live had answered to the call of patriotism, which is one of the sublimest images of idealism. There is comfort also in the recollection of Emerson, and in the fact that for many of the middle years of the nineteenth century he was the most popular of lecturers, with an unfading attractiveness to the plain people, perhaps, because, in Lowell's fine phrase, he "kept constantly burning the beacon of an ideal life above the lower region of turmoil." There is comfort again in the knowledge that idealism is one manifestation of imagination, and that imagination itself is but an intenser form of energy. That we have energy and to spare, no one denies; and we may reckon him a nearsighted observer who does not see also that we have our full share of imagination, even though it has not yet expressed itself in the loftiest regions of art and of science. The outlook is hopeful, and it is not true that

"We, like sentries, are obliged to stand
In starless nights and wait the appointed hour."

The foundations of our commonwealth were laid by the sturdy Elizabethans who bore across the ocean with them their having of that imagination which in England flamed up in

rugged prose and in superb and soaring verse. In two centuries and a half the sons of these stalwart Englishmen have lost nothing of their ability to see visions and to dream dreams, and to put solid foundations under their castles in the air. The flame may seem to die down for a season, but it springs again from the embers most unexpectedly, as it broke forth furiously in 1861. There was imagination at the core of the little war for the freeing of Cuba, — the very attack on Spain, which the Parisian journalist cited to Tolstoi as the proof of our predatory aggressiveness. We said that we were going to war for the sake of the ill-used people in the suffering island close to our shores; we said that we would not annex Cuba; we did the fighting that was needful; — and we kept our word. It is hard to see how even the most bitter of critics can discover in this anything selfish.'

There was imagination also in the sudden stopping of all the steamcraft, of all the railroads, of all the street-cars, of all the incessant traffic of the whole nation, at the moment when the body of a murdered chief magistrate was lowered into the grave. This pause in the work of the world was not only touching, it had a large significance to any one seeking to under-

stand the people of these United States. It was a testimony that the Greeks would have appreciated; it had the bold simplicity of an Attic inscription. And we would thrill again in sympathetic response if it was in the pages of Plutarch that we read the record of another instance: When the time arrived for Admiral Sampson to surrender the command of the fleet he had brought back to Hampton Roads, he came on deck to meet there only those officers whose prescribed duty required them to take part in the farewell ceremonies as set forth in the regulations. But when he went over the side of the flagship he found that the boat which was to bear him ashore was manned by the rest of the officers ready to row him themselves and eager to render this last personal service; and then from every other ship of the fleet there put out a boat also manned by officers, to escort for the last time the commander whom they loved and honored.

V

As another illustration of our regard for the finer and loftier aspects of life, consider our parks, set apart for the use of the people by the city, the state and the nation. In the cities of this new country the public playgrounds

have had to be made, the most of them, and at high cost,—whereas the towns of the Old World have come into possession of theirs for nothing, more often than not, inheriting the private recreation-grounds of their rulers. And Europe has little or nothing to show similar either to the reservations of certain states, like the steadily enlarging preserves in the Catskills and the Adirondacks, or to the ampler national parks, the Yellowstone, the Yosemite and the Grand Canyon of the Colorado, some of them far larger in area than one at least of the original thirteen states. Overcoming the pressure of private greed, the people have ordained the preservation of this natural beauty and its protection for all time under the safe guardianship of the nation and with free access to all who may claim admission to enjoy it.

In like manner many of the battlefields, whereon the nation spent its blood that it might be what it is and what it hopes to be,—these have been taken over by the nation itself and set apart and kept as holy places of pilgrimage. They are free from the despoiling hand of any individual owner. They are adorned with monuments recording the brave deeds of the men who fought there. They serve as constant reminders of the duty we owe to our country and

of the debt we owe to those who made it and who saved it for us. And the loyal veneration with which these fields of blood have been cherished here in the United States finds no counterpart in any country in Europe, no matter how glorious may be its annals of military prowess. Even Waterloo is in private hands; and its broad acres, enriched by the bones of thousands, are tilled every year by the industrious Belgian farmers. Yet it was a Frenchman, Renan, who told us that what welds men into a nation, is "the memory of great deeds done in common and the will to accomplish yet more."

According to the theory of the conservation of energy, there ought to be about as much virtue in the world at one time as at another. According to the theory of the survival of the fittest, there ought to be a little more now than there was a century ago. We Americans to-day have our faults, and they are abundant enough and blatant enough, and foreigners take care that we shall not overlook them; but our ethical standard—however imperfectly we may attain to it—is higher than that of the Greeks under Pericles, of the Romans under Caesar, of the English under Elizabeth. It is higher even than that of our forefathers who established

our freedom, as those know best who have most carefully inquired into the inner history of the American Revolution. In nothing was our advance more striking than in the different treatment meted out to the vanquished after the Revolution and after the Civil War. When we made our peace with the British the native tories were proscribed, and thousands of loyalists left the United States to carry into Canada the indurated hatred of the exiled. But after Lee's surrender at Appomattox, no body of men, no single man indeed, was driven forth to live an alien for the rest of his days; even though a few might choose to go, none were compelled.

This change of conduct on the part of those who were victors in the struggle was evidence of an increasing sympathy. Not only is sectionalism disappearing, but with it is departing the feeling that really underlies it, — the distrust of those who dwell elsewhere than where we do. This distrust is common all over Europe to-day. Here in America it has yielded to a friendly neighborliness which makes the family from Portland, Maine, soon find itself at home in Portland, Oregon. It is getting hard for us to hate anybody, — especially since we have dis-established the devil. We are good-natured and

easy-going; Herbert Spencer even denounced this as our immediate danger, maintaining that we were too good-natured, too easy-going, too tolerant of evil; and he insisted that we needed to strengthen our wills to protest against wrong and to wrestle with it resolutely, and to overcome before it is firmly rooted.

VI

We are kindly and we are helpful; and we are fixed in the belief that somehow everything will work out all right in the long run. But nothing will work out all right unless we so make it work; and excessive optimism may be as corrupting to the fiber of the people as "the Sabbathless pursuit of fortune," as Bacon termed it. When Mr. John Morley was last in this country he seized swiftly upon a chance allusion of mine to this ingrained hopefulness of ours. "Ah, what you call optimism," he cried, "I call fatalism." But an optimism which is solidly based on a survey of the facts cannot fairly be termed fatalism; and another British student of political science, Mr. James Bryce, has recently pointed out that the intelligent native American has—and by experience is justified in having—a firm conviction that the majority of qualified voters are pretty sure to be right.

Then he suggested a reason for the faith that is in us, when he declared that no such feeling exists in Europe, since in Germany the governing class dreads the spread of socialism, in France the republicans know that it is not impossible that Monarchism and Clericalism may succeed in upsetting the Republic, while in Great Britain each party believes that the other party, when it succeeds, succeeds by misleading the people, and neither party supposes that the majority are any more likely to be right than to be wrong.

Mr. Morley and Mr. Bryce were both here in the United States in the fall of 1904, when we were in the midst of a presidential election, one of those prolonged national debates, creating incessant commotion, but invaluable agents of our political education, in so far as they force us all to take thought about the underlying principles of policy by which we wish to see the government guided. It was while this political campaign was at its height that the French visitor to the Russian novelist was setting his notes in order and copying out his assertion that we Americans were mere money-grubbers, "systematically hostile to all idealism." If this unthinking Parisian journalist had only taken the trouble to consider the ad-

dresses which the chief speakers of the two parties here in the United States were then making to their fellow-citizens in the hope of winning votes, he would have discovered that these practical politicians, trained to perceive the subtler shades of popular feeling, were founding all their arguments on the assumption that the American people as a whole wanted to do right. He would have seen that the appeal of these stalwart partisans was rarely to prejudice or to race-hatred, — evil spirits that various orators have sought to arouse and to intensify in the more recent political discussion of the French themselves.

An examination of the platforms, of the letters of the candidates, and of the speeches of the more important leaders on both sides revealed to an American observer the significant fact that "each party tried to demonstrate that it was more peaceable, more equitable, more sincerely devoted to lawful and righteous behavior than the other;" and "the voter was instinctively credited with loving peace and righteousness, and with being stirred by sentiments of good-will toward men." This seems to show that the heart of the people is sound, and that it does not throb in response to ignoble appeals. It seems to show that there is

here the desire ever to do right and to see right done, even if the will is weakened a little by easy-going good-nature, and even if the will fails at times to stiffen itself resolutely to make sure that the right shall prevail.

"Liberty hath a sharp and double edge fit only to be handled by just and virtuous men," so Milton asserted long ago, adding that "to the bad and dissolute, it becomes a mischief unwieldy in their own hands." Even if we Americans can clear ourselves of being "bad and dissolute," we have much to do before we may claim to be "just and virtuous." Justice and virtue are not to be had for the asking; they are the rewards of a manful contest with selfishness and with sloth. They are the results of an honest effort to think straight, and to apply eternal principles to present needs. Merely to feel is only the beginning; what remains is to think and to act.

A British historian, Mr. Frederic Harrison, who came here to spy out the land three or four years before Mr. Morley and Mr. Bryce last visited us, was struck by the fact—and by the many consequences of the fact—that "America is the only land on earth where caste has never had a footing, nor has left a trace." It seemed to him that "vast numbers

and the passion of equality tend to low averages in thought, in manners, and in public opinion, which the zeal of the devoted minority tends gradually to raise to higher planes of thought and conduct." He believed that we should solve our problems one by one because "the zeal for learning, justice and humanity" lies deep in the American heart. Mr. Harrison did not say it in so many words, but it is implied in what he did say, that the absence of caste and the presence of low averages in thought, in manners, and in public opinion impose a heavier task on the devoted minority, whose duty it is to keep alive the zeal for learning, justice and humanity.

Which of us, if haply the spirit moves him, may not elect himself to this devoted minority? Why should not we also, each in our own way, without pretense, without boastfulness, without bullying, do whatsoever in us lies for the attainment of justice and of virtue? It is well to be a gentleman and a scholar; but after all it is best to be a man, ready to do a man's work in the world. And indeed there is no reason why a gentleman and a scholar should not also be a man. He will need to cherish what Huxley called "that enthusiasm for truth, that fanaticism for veracity, which is a greater pos-

session than much learning, a nobler gift than the power of increasing knowledge." He will need also to remember that

"Kings have their dynasties, — but not the mind;
Caesar leaves other Caesars to succeed,
But Wisdom, dying, leaves no heir behind."



LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 011 290 280 6